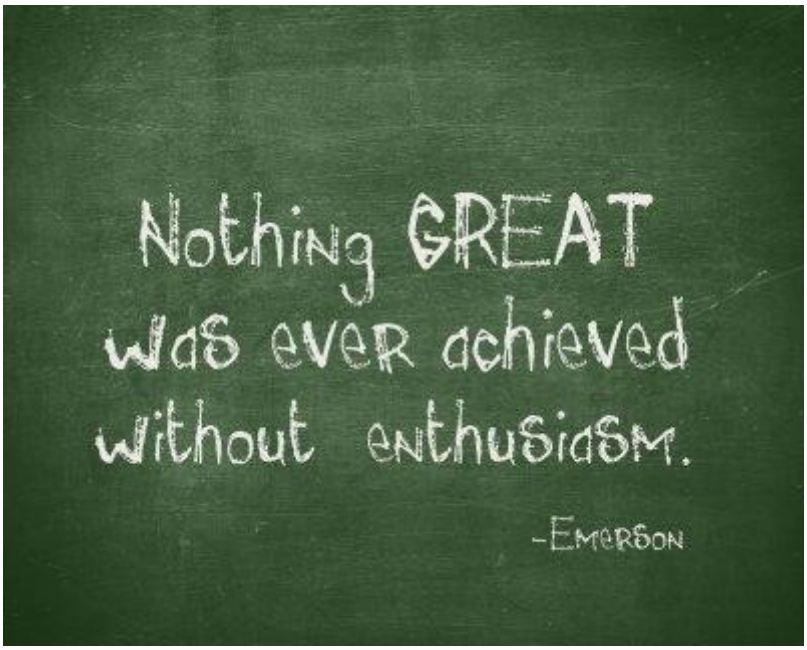
Organizing for America and the “Enthusiasm Gap”



WASHINGTON — Democrats desperately need other Democrats – to vote. – Liz Sidoti, of the Huffington Post

The 2010 Senate elections are barely a month away, and Democrats across the country are getting worried.

In a new poll released last month by Public Policy Polling, Quantifying the Enthusiasm Gap, pollsters have found that in 10 key Senate and gubernatorial races across the country, Republicans are leading by wider margins.

Although the country is more or less split in half between Republican and Democratic party supporters when all eligible voters are asked (about 43% for both, according to the latest NBC/WSJ poll), when likely voters are polled, the Republicans take a substantial lead by roughly 9 points.

“We have two ways of looking at the enthusiasm gap,” Public Policy Polling’s Tom Jensen said in an interview with Evan McMorris-Santoro. “Measuring whether voters are very, somewhat, or not at all excited about voting this fall, and then a step beyond that looking at how they voted for President in 2008.

“”We’re consistently finding that very excited voters are going strongly toward the GOP while somewhat and not at all excited voters are supporting Democrats.” To readers of the Trial by Fire, this should be no surprise. Obama’s administration and the Democratic Party have made good on very little of what they promised during their campaigns, and formerly hysteric supporters of these

campaigns are beginning to realize that the rhetoric of change the Democrats harp on is just that – rhetoric.

After four years of Democratic Party control of the Congress, and nearly two years into Obama's Presidency, the Democrats are beginning to lose their base's support.Deputy National Director of Organizing for America, Obama's re-mobolized campaign organization, Jeremy Bird, remains hopeful, however:

"The past week alone has shown clear signs the enthusiasm-gap theory made popular by the chattering class is overblown. On Tuesday, President Obama kicked off the first of five "Moving America Forward" events with a rally at the University of Wisconsin in Madison "Dwarfing a February 2008 rally on the same campus that drew a crowd of 17,000, last week's Madison rally brought together 26,500 people…"

He went on,

"[The crowd] cheered as the president ticked off the progress made on behalf of young voters in the past two years… And they cheered wildly as the president asked them to canvass, to phone bank, and most importantly, to vote on Nov. 2."Geared toward young voters, the president's speech was part of a larger organizing effort across the country, with students at more than 200 colleges hosting "watch parties" to see a live webcast of the Madison event… [college activists also] committed to vote and planned campus organizing drives for the last few days of voter registration."

Despite this last-minute surge in support by university students, however, (and Obama's repeated embarrassing reminders to the young crowd of just what elected officials were "in the house"), the polls are fairly clear: Democrats are not likely to convince enough of their base that this next round of voting will usher in anything better than the past four years. A recent GALLUP Poll confirms, where 47 percent of Republicans say they were very enthusiastic about voting, only 28 percent of Democrats said the same. Indeed, of the Democrats who are expected to turn out to vote, the prime motivation was simply out of "party loyalty," according to GALLUP, and not to any particularly strong faith in candidates.

It only makes sense. The Democrats have failed time and time again to put through needed reforms for American workers.

The Dem's have had an incredible amount of power over the past four years – a supermajority in Congress, an extremely enthusiastic base, as well as one of the most liberal Democratic presidents in memory. But for all of those electoral victories – and voters are noticing – there has been little substantial change in the quality of life for American's; the recession just keeps rolling on.

Regardless of whether or not it was Bush's fault to begin with, people are looking for hope.

Nearly 19% of American workers are underemployed this month, meaning they only work part-time but want to work full-time or are simply unemployed, according to the most recent study done by GALLUP. Meanwhile, consumer spending remains the lowest its been since the beginning of the economic meltdown, 30 million people remain uninsured and incapable of receiving quality healthcare, and nearly 43% of American workers complain that they are underpaid for what little work they can find.

A new way forward:

The labor movement, as well as a multitude of other NGO's, non-profits, civil societies and left leaning advocacy groups, has been putting all of our eggs in one basket these past four years – into the Democratic Party's basket. Its time for a new strategy.

Far from being a time to sit on our ass and watch the republicans take over congress, now should be the time we get "fired up," in the words of Democratic Party organizers. But if not for the Democrats, then fired up for what?

A growing number of workers on the left believe we should actually divorce ourselves from electoral politics altogether. They argue that in order to focus our resources on a more direct means of fixing our problems, we need to spend less time phone banking for politicians who, lets face it, never deliver on their promises, and more time on organizing with our neighbors and co-workers.

Take workers in the new Jimmy John's Workers Union, for example. The National Labor Relations Board confirmed recently that it will be conducting a union election for 200 workers at ten Minneapolis-area Jimmy John's on October 22.The JJ Workers Union website writes,

"According to a recent report by the US Census Bureau, a record-breaking 43.6 million Americans– 1 in 7 people– are living in poverty. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates the unemployment rate at 9.6%, with 14.9 million people out of work and uncounted millions more too discouraged to look for work. Layoffs and outsourcing have decimated higher-paid jobs, particularly strongholds of unionization such as manufacturing and construction, forcing many workers to seek employment in low-wage areas of the economy once reserved for teenagers and students. For many, it feels like food service and retail are the only jobs left.

"While many workers are forced to seek employment in food service, industry wages and working conditions are widely regarded as substandard; in 2009, the median wage in the fast food industry was $8.28/hr and as of July 2010, the average workweek in fast food was only 24.3 hours. The median annual income for fast food workers is $10,462, or $871 per month. This is less than half the federal poverty line of $21,954 for a family of four, and below the federal poverty line of $ 10,830 for an individual. Jimmy John's is below industry standards, paying most workers the federal minimum wage of $7.25/hr, scheduling most workers less than 20 hours/week, and offering no benefits.

"Despite the appeal of higher wages and better benefits," however, "union density in the fast food industry is stuck at only 1.8%, far below the national average of 12.3%."

In light of these circumstances, and unlike many of the larger union's in the country, the 200 Jimmy Johns workers in Minneapolis have taken a step forward themselves to address their economic hardships, instead of waiting for a Democratic Party action that will never come.

Likewise, similar union's have been popping up amongst Starbucks workers who also face low wages and bad scheduling, as well as tenant and workers right groups on the West coast know as "solidarity networks," such as the growing Seattle Solidarity Network.

Following the lead of the now famous Republic Windows and Doors factory workers in Chicago two years ago, American workers are beginning to "do it themselves."

By uniting with one another, and by taking direct action themselves, American workers are forging a new – and more effective – path, this time without the politicians.

For the full, original article, and more like it, feel free to visit the Trial by Fire.